you go to my head (and you linger like a haunting refrain)

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by moonrocks

Summary

John likes to imagine what Buck was like before all this. What he must look like in civilian clothes, a cowboy hat on his head, leading the cattle home safe. It's a nice image, but then again, it's a part of Buck's life John will never be able to lay claim to, and he's not so sure he likes the idea after all.

Notes

Apologies for any military inaccuracies. Enjoy the WW2 yaoi.

See the end of the work for more notes

John isn't a religious man, but sometimes when things get rocky, he silently says a little prayer, if not for himself than for his boys in formation behind him. Their landing is rough, even with both wheels down. John is afraid their last running engine is just about to crap out when they skid onto the runway. Curt is bracing himself for impact beside John, the tension in his muscles only releasing once they come to a full stop.

"That was a bumpy one," Curt quips.

"You can say that again," John replies, ripping off his air mask.

They exit the fort as the mechanical crew surrounds them, already assessing the damage to the plane. John counts the forts returning on the runway and breathes a sigh of relief when he realizes everyone made it back. He spots Buck across the way with the rest of his crew. They make eye contact and meet each other halfway, clasping hands for a brief moment. John claps Buck on the back.

"Could have been worse," Buck says. "Formation should have been tighter, but we had an organized retreat."

The last thing John wants to do right now is talk shop. What he needs is a stiff drink.

They pile into the trucks. After interrogation—which always seems to go on longer than necessary—and a debrief with the other officers, John retreats to the barracks. He fishes his flask out of his footlocker and spends the rest of the late afternoon answering mail from home and polishing off his stash of rye. By the time the sun is setting, John is beginning to doze off. He wakes up to Buck shaking him.

"Chow," Buck says simply.

John sits up and his flask, which had been sitting squarely on his chest, rolls off and clatters to the floor beside his bunk. The cap is unscrewed, but it's empty. Buck looks at John with his eyebrows raised.

"You might want to reel it in," he says.

John grinds his fist into his eye, rubbing at the sleep as he throws his legs off his bed. "Reel what in?"

Buck rolls his eyes. "You know what."

“You sound like my mother,” John says and stands up.

“And you sound like my father,” Buck quips back.

They begin to walk to the mess hall.

“What are you gonna do, Bucky, if—God forbid—you ever crash land in Germany?” Buck asks, and his expression is dead serious.

His intensity almost makes John uneasy, but he just shrugs. “I don’t know, Buck. Drink a pilsner with the hausfrau probably.”

He grins at Buck widely and anticipates a slap, but Buck just shakes his head as they reach the officers’ mess. John doesn’t understand how Buck copes with any of this, totally viceless and as phlegmatic as he is. No drinking, no gambling, no sports. Buck won’t even entertain the company of other women with Marjorie waiting for him back home. It’d piss John off if he didn’t secretly find it kind of endearing in a confused, frustrated sort of way. When they first met, John wanted to challenge him on it. He’d do anything to loosen Buck up a bit, slip him a shot of whiskey just to see what would happen, but by now, John has begrudgingly accepted it. Buck is a good officer, and if that’s his secret, well, who is he to judge?

After dinner, some of the men trade in their evening passes to take the jeeps into Norwich. John tags along, and convinces Buck and Curt to come as well. The city is still cleaning up after the bombing several weeks ago. Churches, schools, train stations, and hundreds of houses lie in ruins. John tries not to think about the carnage as they drive through the battered streets. Eventually, they find a neighbourhood that got through the raids somewhat unscathed.

The local pub is as busy as ever. Someone is playing fiddle in the corner as the locals dance circles around each other, laughing and stomping along to the music. John is taken by their resiliency and immediately wants to join in on the festivities, while Buck looks less than sure. A couple of lagers and a ginger beer later, Curt walks over to their table with two women, one on each arm.

“Who do we have here?” John says, smiling wide.

Buck already looks embarrassed on their behalf, hiding his face slightly behind his hand.

“This here is Doris,” Curt says, nodding towards the girl on his left, “and this here is Ruth,” he nods to the girl on the right.

John feels drawn to Ruth right off the bat. Her hair is a blonde nest of curlicues on the top of her head, and John immediately likes the stain of red lipstick on the petite blossom of her mouth. Doris is darker, slimmer and tall, which makes Curt look comically short standing next to her. She fiddles with the baby blue bow on the front of her dress and looks coyly over at Buck, because, of course, everyone can't help but look at Buck.

"Be warned," John says, trying to steal the attention away from him. "He doesn't dance."

John winks at Doris, and Buck looks even more embarrassed now. Maybe it's just the tangerine glow of the lantern light above their heads, but John thinks he might be blushing. Something stirs in John's stomach at the thought. He blames it on the booze.

John dances with Ruth for a couple songs, but he can't help but peer over her shoulder every so often to glance at Buck, who's watching them intently but pretending not to. John knows him well enough to be able to tell. As he spins Ruth around, he feels Buck's gaze hot on the back of his neck.

Ruth's laugh is bright in John's ears as they burst out onto the alleyway at the back of the pub. Curt and Doris go off on their own, but not before Curt discretely asks John for a prophylactic. John gives him one he'd slipped inside his jacket pocket and they go about their merry way. Meanwhile, Buck is as quiet as ever. He lollygags behind them back to the jeep, only sticking around to be their designated driver. Ruth directs Buck to the neighborhood where she lives with her parents, explaining on the way that they're off visiting her aunt and uncle a few towns over. She couldn't get the time off at her job as a typist.

"Even after all this, life goes on," John says, waxing poetic from the passenger's side as he gazes at the wreckage left in the bombing's wake.

He looks over at Buck, but Buck doesn't say anything, just keeps driving. Finally, they reach their destination. The house is small and cottage-like with a white, stony facade and a modest garden around the back. It's exactly the kind of thing John might've conjured up back home when he thought of England. Buck parks the jeep out front but doesn't get out.

"I'll wait here," he says, removing a pack of toothpicks from his breast

pocket and sliding one into his mouth.

John helps Ruth out of the jeep. “Suit yourself,” he says, then follows Ruth inside.

Ruth’s lipstick is tacky on John’s skin as they kiss on the sofa in the living room. She’s a beautiful girl, and soft beneath John’s roaming hands. John is hard in his slacks, but Ruth doesn’t seem to mind as she presses kisses down the length of his throat to the stiff collar of his uniform. John doesn’t know if she’s the kind of girl to let him score, but he’s hoping he’ll soon find out. He hums pleasantly as she finds his mouth again and he palms her left breast through the woollen fabric of her dress. It’s quiet besides the sound of their lips coming together and apart, but then John hears a faint *plink*, *plink*, *plink* coming from the window beside his head. He looks up and over and sees Buck in the backyard, facing away from the house with a hand in his pocket. He’s throwing pebbles from the garden into a stone fountain a few feet away. It’s decorated by the winged statuette of a cherub.

Ruth tries to pull John back down for a kiss, but he resists her, still looking out the window into the backyard. Buck just looks so sad and alone. It’s not like John to leave him hanging.

“I’ll be back in a second,” John says, pulling away despite Ruth’s protests. “Just one second.” He gets up, but lingers in the doorway. “Stay right there,” he demands with a wink. “Don’t move an inch.”

Ruth does as she’s told, remaining supine on the sofa while John slips out the back door into the garden. It’s surreal, passing by rose bushes and gardenias when just a moment ago they were driving by piles of rubble and ash. He finds Buck who’s still throwing pebbles into the fountain, one by one, chewing on the toothpick between his lips.

“You don’t have to wait around,” John says as he comes up to stand a couple of feet behind him. “I can walk into town and hitch back to base. I’m sure there’ll be a few stragglers at the pub who can give me a ride.”

Buck doesn’t look over his shoulder, so John can’t read his face. He doesn’t say anything for a long while.

“Buck?” John asks when he finally realizes Buck isn’t going to say anything at all. He takes a step towards him, puts his hand on Buck’s shoulder. “Is something wrong?”

Buck finally turns around and John drops his hand. Buck’s eyes are

glassy and blue like dragonfly marbles, reflective in the gleaming moonlight. “It’s nothing,” he says, then, “You’ve got lipstick all over your face.”

John ignores his comment, rubs at his mouth with the back of his hand. “No, I think it’s something,” he says. “Tell me. Is it—is it Marjorie? Because I know it must be hard, being away from her, watching the fellas over here with the girls.”

“It’s not that.” Buck shakes his head and looks at the ground, like he’s fighting with himself more than he’s fighting with John. “I can’t talk about it.”

“Why not?” John says, nonplussed. “I’m your best friend, aren’t I?”

“You are, John,” Buck says, and it’s rare that he uses John’s first name. “That’s the problem.”

John stares at him, growing more and more confused. “Well, maybe we should go,” he says finally. “You’re not making a lick of sense. You must be exhausted or something. You sure you didn’t have anything to drink tonight?”

Buck laughs a bit at that, twists the toothpick in his mouth with his thumb and forefinger. He plucks it from his mouth and throws it on the ground. “I’m as awake as I’ll ever be, Bucky.”

It doesn’t register, at first, what happens. All John feels is lips on his. Smooth and wet, not tacky like Ruth’s. Buck presses John up against the garden wall, away from view, and the gritty brick grinds into John’s back. It’s a rougher, more desperate kiss than any kiss John has ever had. Granted, he’s never kissed another man before. He doesn’t know what to do. There isn’t even the time to decide whether or not he likes it before Buck is pulling away, cheeks flaming.

He doesn’t even look at John, just fixes his cap on his head and brushes past him, weaves his way around the side of the house and out of the garden. John wants to call after him, but he has no voice. He’s frozen. He hears the jeep engine start and the crunch of tires on gravel as Buck pulls away from the curb. John can barely breathe. His knees feel weak, and he nearly reaches out to grip the wall to steady himself.

The sound of the jeep’s engine grows faint as Buck speeds down the street. John doesn’t know what to do. His best friend just kissed him and he has no idea what to do.

He goes back inside, hoping to God that Ruth didn't see any of that. It doesn't appear like she has. She's taken off her dress and is sitting on the sofa in her slip. John doesn't say anything, doesn't bother to offer an explanation. He sinks down on the sofa beside her, probably looking shell-shocked as all hell, but Ruth doesn't seem to notice, and if she notices then she doesn't seem to care. She kisses him again, and John lets himself be kissed, but against his better judgment, it's someone else's lips on his mind.

*

The walk back to town is excruciating.

John made love to her. Of course, he did. John Egan has never said no to a woman, a drink, a bet, a fight. But this time was different, unlike anything he's felt with a woman before. It was more like fulfilling a compulsion than an actual want. Meanwhile, John thinks about Buck and his ears grow as hot as clothing irons. His stomach swims, and he honestly isn't sure if it's a good feeling or a bad one. He's so confused. He could barely find the words to say goodbye to Ruth. He had kissed her on the cheek, too shaken to feel her mouth—and Buck's mouth—again.

To his surprise, he finds Curt back at the pub with Crosby and Bubbles. They're finishing off the last dregs of their beers and look about ready to head out.

"Where's Doris?" John asks when he approaches them.

Curt gives him a sour look. "She has to work in the morning. Fuckin' secretaries."

"AKA she wouldn't put out," Bubbles jokes.

Crosby giggles at that, and it's obvious he's had a bit too much to drink. Curt slaps him on the lapel of his uniform.

"How are you, sir?" Crosby asks John after righting himself. "Have you had a good night?"

John thinks of Ruth and feels a pang of guilt in his gut. "Swell," he says with an unintentionally tight smile. "Has Buck been by here by any chance?"

"We haven't seen him, have we boys?" Curt says and Bubbles and Crosby shake their heads.

“I thought he was with you, sir,” Crosby says.

“No,” John replies. “He must’ve gone back to base.”

John hitches a ride with Curt, Crosby and Bubbles. When they get to base, John goes straight for the barracks, but Buck’s bunk is empty. John changes out of his uniform and brushes his teeth in the latrine, trying to find normalcy in his routine, but his head is pounding. He needs another drink, but he polished off his flask.

John tosses and turns in bed for what feels like hours, listening to people come and go. Each time he wonders if it’s Buck’s footsteps on the floor he’s hearing, until eventually, he falls asleep.

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John almost drops his cup of coffee when he sees Buck in the mess hall that morning, but then again, he’s been preparing himself for this moment since he opened his eyes at 0500 and Buck was still missing from his bunk.

Buck is sitting in his usual spot, reading a copy of *The Stars and Stripes* and drinking a glass of water with Alka-Seltzer. John doesn’t know whether he should sit with him—if this is even the right place for a confrontation—but his feet bring him there out of habit.

“Morning,” John says, setting his coffee down on the table in front of Buck and taking a seat.

“Morning,” Buck replies, and for a moment it’s like nothing’s happened at all.

Silence engulfs them. Buck folds his newspaper up and sets it on the table beside his glass of Alka-Seltzer. His movements are too measured and deliberate; John knows he’s nervous. It’s how he acts before a big mission, controlled to a fault, so stiff he appears robotic.

“Did you get any sleep?” John asks, and it seems so stupid to make small talk, but he makes it anyway. “I didn’t catch you in the barracks.”

“Some,” Buck says, low in his throat.

He’s not really looking at John, like the way a wild animal darts away from the eyes of its predator. John doesn’t like the implication of that. What does Buck think he’s going to do? Tell their CO? John would

never jeopardize their squadron like that. Besides, if he told the truth about what happened, he'd be implicating himself. He didn't push Buck away, he didn't run after him and beat him to a pulp like most men would. Buck is his best friend. He's not going to do any of that.

John sighs to himself, finally resigning himself to the conversation. "Do you want to talk about—"

"Not here," Buck interrupts.

John abandons his coffee on the table and follows Buck outside. The sky is overcast and the air feels humid and heavy. They find an unpopulated spot between the mess hall and the latrines to talk. Buck is the first one to speak.

"I don't know what to say, Bucky," he begins, "It didn't mean anything. I was outta my head."

"Goddamn right you were," John says, hands on his hips, but his words have no real bite to them. He's mostly concerned about where the hell they're gonna go from here. "What were you thinking, Gale?"

"I wasn't thinking," Buck replies. "It's been so long without Marjorie —" He swallows hard. "Does this change things?"

"What do you mean?"

"Does this change things?" Buck repeats. He licks his dry lips. "Can you live with this? Or should," he takes a breath, "should I ask about re-assignment?"

"Re-assignment?" John wants to laugh in his face. "Don't fuckin' talk like that. Re-assignment? *Puh*, the only way you're leaving me and the boys is in a goddamn shoebox."

Relief washes over Buck's face for a moment, then his brow furrows again. "You don't care that I'm—"

"What?" John says. "Queer?"

Buck nods, and his unquestioned acknowledgment of it does send John reeling a bit. He runs a hand over his face. It is, if not a difficult pill to swallow, than a very different kind of pill than John is used to. He knew people like Buck existed, he just never thought he would run into them in the military, let alone someone like him could turn out to be one of his closest friends.

“I don’t want to lose you,” is all John manages to say. “You’re a good pilot, Buck. A good officer. A good man. I know the boys would miss you like hell.”

I would miss you like hell, John thinks but doesn’t say. There’s a lot he doesn’t dare to. He wants to ask Buck why out of all the guys in the Eighth he picked John to kiss. Because let’s face it, John Egan is, well, John Egan. An obnoxious drunk, a man of many vices, a second-rate officer. Was he just there? Or was there something more to it? As curious as John is, he can’t think too hard about it. He’s already been thrown for a loop. He doesn’t want to lay the confusion on any thicker.

“The men need you,” John says after a moment. “The rest is just background noise.”

“You mean that?” Buck asks.

John has never seen Buck so vulnerable, so open and exposed to things outside of him. It moves John, secretly and shamefully, and he’s not sure why he feels so uneasy when he considers for even a brief moment what that shame might entail.

“I mean that,” John says, then throws an arm around Buck’s shoulders, squeezing him to his side. “Come on, we’ve only got a half-hour till lecture. We might as well get some grub in us.”

*

The next several days are spent preparing for their next mission. Intel is gathered and spread amongst the squadrons, maps are studied, the engineers are debriefed and any extra repairs on the B-17s are carried out. John feels antsy for more reasons than one. Things have been mostly normal between him and Buck, but who knows how that might change in a high-stress, combat situation.

John prepares the only way he knows how, by downing his fair share of liquour and philandering about with his men. One night, the Eighth Air Force band holds another shindig in the hall. John dances to his heart’s content with a couple of Red Cross nurses while Buck sits back and watches like he usually does, laughing intermittently. John must have a few too many because next thing he knows he’s half-running, half-stumbling back to the barracks with Buck on his tail.

“You can’t catch me!” he calls over his shoulder. “Slowpoke!”

He feels like a drunken, carefree child, if just for a moment. Tomorrow, when they take off for enemy skies, that's when he'll be a man.

Buck gains on him when John's boot catches the tarmac and causes him to falter. Even so, John beats him back to the barracks. Huffing and puffing, he clamours into the empty Nissen hut and puts his hands on his hips so his lungs can fully expand. Buck follows him in, and seeing that he's beaten him there, lunges for his waist. He tackles John onto his bunk and they laugh, hard.

This is the first time in a while they've been this loose with each other. John revels in it, maybe a little too much. The alcohol eggs him on.

"Hey, Buck?"

"Yeah?"

"Was I the first man you ever kissed?"

Buck appears mildly horrified John would even ask such a question, but the lines smooth out from his face after a moment. "Well, no."

"What?" John practically shouts.

Buck clamps a hand over John's mouth to quiet him, and John has the impulse to sink his teeth into the fleshy part of Buck's palm. Instead, he wriggles free. "Who was it then?" he asks. "Don't tell me it's another guy in the 100th."

"No, of course not," Buck says. "How stupid do you think I am?"

"Stupid enough to kiss me, that's for sure."

Buck rolls his eyes. "It was a boy back home. He grew up on the ranch next to my grandparents' farm. I used to help him milk the cows after school."

"That's so pastoral," John comments, wistful.

He likes to imagine what Buck was like before all this. What he must look like in civilian clothes, a cowboy hat on his head, leading the cattle home safe. It's a nice image, but then again, it's a part of Buck's life John will never be able to lay claim to, and he's not so sure he likes the idea after all.

It must be the mix of alcohol and the anticipation for their next mission, because John has strange dreams that night. He sits cross-legged in the middle of a dilapidated barn, sunlight streaming in from the rotted roof slats. Outside, miles of wheat fields; Wyoming, somewhere. Dust motes dance in the air. John lays down in a bed made of hay, breathes in the arid smell of straw and barn animals. Someone lays down beside him, and he feels the tacky slip of Ruth's lipstick on his mouth again, then the soft press of fingers against his arm. The next moment, Buck is there with him. He kisses John again, and this time John savors Buck like he's the last sip of whiskey before the bar closes.

John wakes up to planes roaring overhead, but they're only imaginary. He's oddly sweaty, his moistened chest sticking to his t-shirt and the sheets over top of him. He pulls back the blankets and slips out of bed. Feeling in the dark for his footlocker, he finds his lighter and a partly squished, half-empty carton of Lucky Strikes.

John rarely smokes cigarettes, but he sits outside the barracks on the grass and smokes one halfway. Like clockwork, Buck finds him: he always finds him. John thinks about offering Buck the other half of the cig, but he knows he won't take it. He stubs it out on the pavement instead.

"Ready for tomorrow?" Buck asks after a while.

John already feels jittery from the nicotine. "I'll know once I'm up there."

Buck chuckles at that. "I guess you will."

*

The mission is a washout. Only a couple hours after takeoff, two of their forts have to bow out due to catastrophic engine failure. Their formation remains tight but weaker without them. John does his job the best he can, but it isn't always enough. They meet heavy flak over enemy territory as they unload their bombs, which miss their targets, landing closer to the channel than the ports. The weather is uncooperative with heavy clouds, and communication with the squadrons grows more difficult the more flak explodes in the air around them. John tries to keep his cool, but he can't help but think about Buck, just as helpless as he is somewhere in the sky beside him.

They retreat with their tails between their legs, but their landing back at base is comparatively smooth, like the universe is laughing in their

faces.

“Did we lose anyone?” John asks as he disembarks from his fort and the engineer crews unload from their trucks to surround the grounded planes.

“Unsure, sir,” says one of the mechanics.

John spies Buck’s fort just down the runway and begins walking towards it. Its engines are smoking, the wings and parts of the hull ripped apart by flak. He breaks out into a jog, then a run as he sees Buck exit the plane, his face dripping red.

“Medic!” The word tears through John’s throat without much of a thought. “We need a medic over here!”

Crosby is helping Buck down the runway, supporting most of his weight. Buck looks dazed as John meets him on the tarmac, reaching out and gripping his arm for dear life. There’s so much blood, John can’t really tell where he’s hit. Maybe a head wound, as Buck’s normally straw-coloured hair is dyed crimson.

“What the fuck happened?” John asks Crosby.

“Piece of flak pierced the cockpit,” Buck explains before Crosby can answer. His voice is even raspier than usual, weaker. “Just about tore my head off.”

“Shh, don’t talk. We’re gonna fix you up, Buck,” John reassures him as two medics with a stretcher approach them, then coax Buck onto it. “Gonna fix you up real good.”

John keeps a hold on Buck’s hand as the medics carry him towards the ambulance. His grip is slack, but John refuses to let go.

“We need to get you to interrogation, sir,” Crosby says, walking alongside them.

“The hell you do,” John replies.

He follows Buck into the ambulance. The doors close and the vehicle speeds down the runway.

Buck is unconscious by the time they get to the hospital. John stands in the corner of the room, biting his thumbnail as the nurses work on him, wiping away the blood from his hair, applying sulfa,

administering a dose of morphine and suturing his wound.

“Major Cleven is lucky,” the head nurse tells John afterward as she wipes the blood from her hands. “He’s lost a lot of blood, but his skull is intact. The piece of debris only severed his dermis. He may have a minor concussion, so we’re going to keep him here overnight for observation. Just to be safe.”

John is well acquainted with near misses, but he’s still shaken at the idea of what a mere inch to the right might have meant for them both. He sits at Buck’s side, twirling his hat in his hands as he waits for him to wake up. The setting sun is streaming through the windows when Buck’s eyes finally flutter open. They remain half-lidded, probably from the morphine.

“Don’t worry, I made sure they gave you the good stuff,” John says.

Buck smiles a bit at that, which makes John’s heart skip. He blames it on his plateauing adrenaline.

“How do you feel?” John asks.

“High as a kite,” Buck replies, shifting in his bed.

John adjusts the covers for him, pulling them up over his chest. “You scared the hell out of me, you know.”

“You’d survive,” Buck mumbles.

John frowns at him. “What do you mean?”

“Without me,” Buck says. “You’d survive.”

John doesn’t even want to think about that. “Well,” he says, trying not to let his face falter. “That remains to be seen. Doesn’t it?”

John puts his hat back on and stands up. “Get some rest, alright? I’ve got to get to interrogation before I’m demoted. Again,” he says. “I’ll come by later.”

John moves past the bed but before he can head towards the door Buck reaches out and grabs his hand. He has a funny look on his face, like he isn’t quite sure where he is, and it’s the closest John has ever gotten to seeing him drunk.

“I meant it, y’know,” Buck says.

John laughs through his nose. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“When I kissed you, Bucky. I meant it.”

John swallows hard, his expression immediately sobering. He’s not sure what he’s hearing, if this is an actual confession or if Buck’s just off his nut from the drugs.

“You don’t know what you’re saying, Buck. You have a concussion,” John says, and Buck drops his hand from his. His eyes flutter closed. “Try to get some sleep.”

Buck nods, but doesn’t say anything more. He appears to drift off, and John leaves, his heart pounding so hard against his rib cage he thinks it might crack.

After interrogation, John forgoes dinner for the pub. He drinks beer after beer, wondering what the hell he should do. He doesn’t come up with anything, just gets drunker and drunker as the hours pass by. Eventually, he finds himself back at the barracks, wasted and alone. Ruth had slipped him a piece of paper with her number on it before he had left that night, but it’s probably an awkward time to call. He can’t drive into Norwich like this anyway, even if he did have an evening pass.

John changes into military slacks and a t-shirt and heads for the showers, hoping the hot water will clear his head, or at least sober him up. John leans his arms against the tiled wall as the water streams down his back, warming his aching muscles, hot and wet like the blood that had coated Buck’s face.

John wills the image away and ends up thinking about the dream he’d had the night before: Buck laying in the hay beside him, lips parted, his skin golden from the sun.

John feels his groin twitch at the thought, but he’s too ashamed to take himself in hand. He washes his hair then turns the water off. Back at the barracks, he takes pull after pull of his flask. He knows drowning himself in liquor isn’t going to make these feelings go away, but it’s the only game plan he’s got.

He must pass out in his bunk at some point because when he opens his eyes, it’s very early morning. John stumbles out of the barracks with a pounding headache, intent on visiting Buck at the hospital. He walks instead of riding his bike, hoping the early AM air will wake him up. A nurse stands outside the building smoking a cigarette. John has seen

her before, at the dances. She's pretty with long legs and mousy hair. He bums a cigarette off her.

"What's your name again?" he asks her as he takes a long drag. The nicotine sobers him up ever so slightly.

"Jean," she tells him.

"Hi, Jean." He sticks out his hand. "I'm John."

She takes it, laughing under her breath.

He wants to kiss her, selfishly, just to imagine again what it might feel like to have Buck's lips on his, but he settles for the oral pleasures of the cigarette she gave him. They smoke in silence until a rowdy group of off-duty mechanics rounds the corner, piss-drunk and shouting obscenities.

"Get a load of her," one of them says, pointing at Jean.

One of the mechanics wolf whistles and Jean makes a disgusted sound in the back of her throat, stubbing out her cigarette on the brick facade of the hospital.

"Jack asses," she hisses.

"Thanks for the smoke," John says as she passes him to go back inside, smiling tightly.

John flicks his cigarette onto the ground, then walks over to the group of mechanics. "Did you leave your manners back home, boys?"

"What's it to you?" one of them slurs, and it's obvious they're all too hammered to even notice John's rank. "Just because you can't score with her doesn't mean we can't try."

John's blood is boiling, and maybe it's because he's had too much to drink and he's feeling self-hating, but he has no patience for these lowlifes. They snicker at him, taking swigs from their bagged beer bottles. One of them empties theirs, then tosses it at John. It flies past his head, smashing into a million pieces on the ground.

The next minute and a half is a blur, but John throws the first punch. He always does; it's the one good thing his daddy taught him. They tussle, exchanging blows. John knocks a couple of the mechanics down on their asses, but they quickly outnumber him. He's on the

tarmac, bruised and losing consciousness when he hears the military police sirens growing closer. John laughs to himself, tasting blood in his mouth.

*

He wakes up in the drunk tank, a periwinkle bruise forming high on his cheekbone. Colonel Taylor is incensed, but John's rank relative to the rank of the mechanics he sucker-punched protects him from court-martial.

The worst part isn't even the stain on his record, it's the look on Buck's face when he comes to get John out. Deep-seated disappointment, barely concealed. He looks worse for wear himself, a gauze bandage wrapped around his head wound, which peeks out from the bottom of his cap.

"We need to talk," John says as they exit the building and get into the jeep.

The sky is just beginning to lighten, a rope of sunshine edging upon the horizon.

"About what?" Buck says, and John can see the ball of his jaw harden. He pulls away from the curb, and they roar down the road.

"Don't play stupid, Buck," John says. "Don't you know what you're doing to me?"

A beat passes, then Buck stops the jeep, abruptly turning off the ignition in the middle of the airfield. His jaw is set, and he looks angrier than John has ever seen him. "Do you want to hit me, Bucky? Call me a queer?"

John feels like he's just been punched. "What the hell are you talking about, Buck?" he says. "I told you it didn't matter to me."

"Then what's going on with you?" Buck asks. "Where do you get off picking fights with our crew and getting thrown in the drunk tank? What's the matter with you?"

"What's the matter with me?" John scoffs. He lowers his voice. The airfield is mostly empty—the boys are still waking up, getting some breakfast in their bellies—but this isn't the best place for this conversation. Maybe there's no good place. "You're the one who kissed me, Gale, then lied that it meant nothing. Why would you say

that?"

It feels strange to talk about it so blatantly after days of ignoring the issue.

Buck looks confused. "What are you talking about?"

"In the hospital," John says quietly. "Don't you remember?"

For a moment, John is afraid he made the whole thing up, or maybe Buck really was out of his head on all that morphine. Despite John's worries, realization soon dawns on Buck's face. He looks away, then gets out of the jeep altogether, walking to the edge of the road. John momentarily thinks Buck is going to be sick—he did just get out of the hospital—but Buck only stands there, watching the burgeoning hustle and bustle of base in the distance.

John exits the jeep and walks over to stand beside him.

"Buck…" John says, and it sounds like a plea. "Look at me, please."

Buck looks over but doesn't turn his head fully. It looks like it pains him, like John's eyes are skinning him clean and picking through the viscera.

"Why me?" John asks after a moment, and he feels choked up, like there's a peach pit working its way up his esophagus. "Why risk all of this? Why me?"

Buck doesn't say anything for a long while, then, "Guess I'm in love with you, John."

"Oh."

The ground opens up below John and his stomach swims. At first, he can't tell with what, but after a moment, it feels an awful lot like joy, like the rush he gets after a successful mission when both wheels come down.

John laughs, and maybe he's still half-drunk, half-hysterical, but he can't stop laughing: a deep, belly laugh. "Don't ever let me tell you you have good taste, Major."

Then, John's feet are bringing him forward. He drags Buck over to the jeep by the front of his jacket and presses him up against it, out of view.

Their lips meet, and it's everything John's been dreaming about since the first time. Buck's unresponsive at first, like he's weighing whether this is really happening or not, but soon enough he's kissing John back, fervent and open-mouthed. His hands are in John's hair, roaming upwards until his cap falls off, while John still has his fists balled in the front of his uniform. It's dangerous, doing this out in the open, but John can't stand to think about it anymore. All he can feel is Buck's body pressed up against his, his tongue warm against his teeth.

Eventually, John pulls away, trying to catch his breath. Buck is red in the face, looking at him wantonly and with enough unmuted affection to sweep John's feet out from underneath him. John leans forward and presses their foreheads together.

"I wouldn't survive," John says. "Just so you know."

"What are you talking about?" Buck asks.

"In the hospital, you told me I'd survive without you." John shakes his head slightly. "I wouldn't, Buck. I *won't*. You have to know that."

"Hey, I'm not going anywhere," Buck says, hushing him. He cups John's cheek in his warm palm. It feels sacramental. "You can count on that."

John cracks a smile, then kisses Buck again, and again, and again.

He never really stops.

End Notes

Thanks for reading! Let me know what you think.

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